GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS IN LIBRARIES

by Daniell Wilkins

Like many librarians (and would-be librarians!), I was skeptical of the value of comic books and graphic novels. My encounters with the genre were limited. I had once browsed through a friend's collection of Calvin and Hobbes, and I had seen fierce, scantily-clad warriors on the covers of comics at newsstands. I knew Superman, Batman and Spider-man began as comic book heroes. I dismissed comic books along with the super-heroes as adolescent male fantasies to be, hopefully, out-grown. I never entertained the idea that comics or their cousins, graphic novels, could have meaningful messages or be aids in teaching literacy.

Then one Saturday, my boyfriend dragged me into a comic store to pick up the latest edition of Ultimate Spider-man. He noticed a copy of Alan Moore's *Watchman* and exclaimed excitedly, "I've been looking for my copy of this. I think you'd like it. It's not your typical super-hero story. The super-heroes in it are these very flawed people; you'd have to be a little screwed up to dress up in tights and a cape. It really changed the comic book industry when it was published!" Well, I had to read a graphic novel for class, so we began reading it together. Not an easy read either from a comprehension standpoint or emotionally, *Watchman* stood every idea I had about comics on its head.

"GOOD" LITERATURE"

Moore's story is complex without the obvious good triumphing over evil I expected from comics. His characters have depth and he places them in history, making frequent references to actual events. He employs literary techniques writing a story within a story, using double entendre and symbolism and his depictions of women are statuesque with fairly realistic proportions (although they still fight in heels). My stereotypes of comic books proved to be shallow generalizations.

My experience is not unique. Maureen Mooney in her article, "Graphic Novels, How They Can Work in Libraries," recounts a similar story: "The intellect of the authors and illustrators…amazed me. Several included references to classic literature or had illustrations that only made sense if the reader has some prior knowledge of history and literature"(3). Reading such novels requires the reader to make connections not only between the text and pictures but also to previous knowledge developing skills of synthesis and interpretation. Moore's works are not the only graphic novels that break the mold. There are others including *Bone, The Tale of One Bad Rat and Maus.*

Besides being good literature, graphic novels belong in libraries because librarians have a mandate to provide materials "for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community"(Library Bill of Rights). Graphic novels have a wide readership that defies categories. Ranma ½ and the Elfquest series appeal to both genders (Crawford, 1; Bruggeman, 2). Some graphic novels contain adult material (Watchmen and the Sandman series), but some are aimed at elementary age children (Bone and Little Miss Adventures). While graphic novels often find a ready audience among reluctant and emerging readers, the widely-read and well-educated are also some of the biggest fans. Neil Gaiman, author of the popular Sandman series, recounts how teachers told him reading comics would stop him from reading more "serious" works. He would tell them, "But I've already read all the books in the library" (Gaiman, 1). A failure to collect graphic novels and comics does a disservice to many groups of people.

Michele Gorman, a young adult librarian who has written about graphic novels in the library community, says, "I think that if we as librarians only use tools that we understand, that we enjoy ourselves, then we're going to miss a majority of the kids whom we serve" (Foster, 2). Librarians are charged with not letting their personal bias in the way of providing access (ALA Code of Ethics). Graphic novels are no exception.

TOOLS FOR LITERACY

Educators have been discovering that comic books are an excellent way to get reluctant readers to read because of action-packed storylines and pictures which help interpret the text (Foster, 2). In "A Novel Approach: Using Graphic Novels to Attract Reluctant

Readers and Promote Literacy", Philip Crawford, cites research by Stephen Krashen indicating "light reading" is the surest way to influence kids to read (1). Giving children something they can succeed with, understand, and find enjoyable will hook them on the idea of reading.

Comics teach emergent readers about literary devices such as foreshadowing and flashbacks and actively engage the reader in decoding meaning by through the alternating interpretation of visual and textual clues (Mooney, 1). Graphic novels of a higher reading comprehension level, like Watchmen, employ allusions and metaphors while even the basic superhero comics teach plot, conflict and setting (Foster, 2). Because the pictures support the text, comic books can be useful in helping second-language learners master a language (Crawford, 1).

DEVELOPING A COLLECTION

How do you go about developing a graphic novel collection? Graphic novels are a relatively new genre to libraries and one with a unique format. Creating a collection can appear daunting especially if you're not a fan. Maybe you'll never love the X-Men as much as Little House on the Prairie, but you should familiarize yourself with what's popular. As recently as 1997, sources exclusively reviewing graphic novels were scarce and developing a relationship with your local comic book store was your best bet (Bruggeman, 3). This continues to be an excellent way to both chose and purchase for your collection. Browsing the shelves and talking with the manager keeps you in touch with what is popular in your community and you can get advice from an expert (Gorman, 2).

With the increasing acceptance of graphic novels as part of the library's collection, review sources and vendors are more readily accessible. Kat Kan writes a monthly column reviewing graphic novels and comic books in VOYA. Kan also reviews for Diamond Comics, the world's largest distributor of comics and a library-friendly vendor. (http://bookshelf.diamondcomics.com/reviews). Other mainstream publishers such as Baker and Taylor now carry graphic novels as well.

Comic books are written for a wide variety of audiences. Considering who you wish to target will help you choose appropriate books for your collection. Superhero comics are still the most popular especially with upper elementary students and teens. Manga (Japanese-style comics) are popular with girls. Many of the top-rated graphic novels contain adult material so be sure to investigate before purchasing for a juvenile collection. Look for age recommendations on top-picks lists.

Most libraries suggest creating a separate section for graphic novels and comics unless you want them buried in the 741s. Lora Bruggeman says her library organizes their collection either by author or character, whichever the book is more highly identified with (5). Place graphic novel and comics face outward so that their eye-catching covers will do their job. Get the word out that you have a graphic novel collection. Bruggeman's library sent out press releases to the local junior and senior high.

The controversial nature of some comics and the stereotypes some patrons will have of them often causes them to be challenged. Add a section to your collection policy indicating your reasons for collecting this format. Post information about graphic novels in general and reviews of specific titles to educate concerned adults. Shelve graphic novels and comics away from areas for small children (Gorman, 3).

The literature differs on whether to purchase paperbacks or bound volumes. Bruggeman recounts: "Our graphic novels covered with book tape have worn badly and have lost pages" (4). Gorman believes "kids are more apt to check [graphic novels/comics] out if they can cram them into their backpacks or back pockets" (3). She suggest taping the spines and the edges when they begin to show wear.

With some effort, your graphic novels will likely become one of the most highly circulated parts of your collection. You will be reaching reluctant readers, encouraging emergent ones and providing a service to some often-overlooked segments of your community.

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